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WEITERE INFORMATIONEN OK

An unending variety of topics

Sunday, July 01, 2012

More short takes

Perhaps I should take up Twitter, but I already have this blog, and even my short takes tend to go a bit over 140 characters. So here goes:

* The most important professions in the modern world may be the most reviled: advertiser, salesperson, lawyer, and financial trader. What these professions have in common is extending useful social interactions far beyond the tribe-sized groups we were evolved to inhabit (most often characterized by the Dunbar number). This commonly involves activities that fly in the face of our tribal moral instincts.

* On a related note, much mistaken thinking about society could be eliminated by the most straightforward application of the pigeonhole principle: you can't fit more pigeons into your pigeon coop than you have holes to put them in. Even if you were telepathic, you could not learn all of what is going on in everybody's head because there is no room to fit all that information in yours. If I could completely scan 1,000 brains and had some machine to copy the contents of those into mine, I could only learn at most about a thousandth of the information stored in those brains, and then only at the cost of forgetting all else I had known. That's a theoretical optimum; any such real-world transfer process, such as reading and writing an e-mail or a book, or tutoring, or using or influencing a market price, will pick up only a small fraction of even the theoretically acquirable knowledge or preferences in the mind(s) at the other end of said process, or if you prefer of the information stored by those brain(s). Of course, one can argue that some kinds of knowledge -- like the kinds you and I know? -- are vastly more important than others, but such a claim is usually more snobbery than fact. Furthermore, a society with more such computational and mental diversity is more productive, because specialized algorithms, mental processes, and skills are generally far more productive than generalized ones. As Friedrich Hayek pointed out, our mutual inability to understand a very high fraction of what others know has profound implications for our economic and political institutions.

* A big problem in the last few years has been the poor recording of transfers of ownership of mortgages (i.e. of the debt not the house). The issue of recording transfers of contractual rights is very interesting. I have a proposal for this, secure property titles. This should work just as well for mortgage securities and other kinds of transferable contractual rights as it does for the real estate itself or other kinds of property. Anytime you transfer rights to a contract it should be registered in such a secure and reliable public database in order to avoid the risk of not being able to prove ownership in court.

* Not only should you disagree with others, but you should disagree with yourself. Totalitarian thought asks us to consider, much less accept, only one hypothesis at a time. By contrast quantum thought, as I call it -- although it already has a traditional name less recognizable to the modern ear, scholastic thought -- demands that we simultaneoulsy consider often mutually contradictory

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Nick Szabo

"A premier thinker about history, law and economics, and the lessons they have for security." -- Adam Shostack, Emergent Chaos

"Szabo comes out with these essays that leave me in awe." -- Brian Dunbar

"Reading material that is eclectic, challenging and endlessly fascinating." -- Sean McGrath, Propylon

"Like most blogs worth my attention, this blog is updated only infrequently. That is because the authors of blogs worth my attention only post when they have something to say that is true, relevant and not already known by their audience. Most of the human race does not have the skill to know when an idea has these three properties. The skill is particularly rare in the fields of politics and economics, which is why this blog is such a rare and valuable thing." -- Richard Hollerith

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possibilities. Thinking about and presenting only one side's arguments gives one's thought and prose a false patina of consistency: a fallacy of thought and communications similar to false precision, but much more common and imporant. Like false precision, it can be a mental mistake or a misleading rhetorical habit. In quantum reality, by contrast, I can be both for and against a proposition because I am entertaining at least two significantly possible but inconsistent hypotheses, or because I favor some parts of a set of ideas and not others. If you are unable or unwilling to think in such a quantum or scholastic manner, it is much less likely that your thoughts are worthy of others' consideration.

Posted by Nick Szabo at 10:47 PM

11 comments:

nazgulnarsil said...

I think we should have a bitcoin style P2P public ledger of property titles. Anyone can query the blockchain at any time and discover the owner of a particular set of keys.

3:41 AM

Anonymous said...

Have you read Liars and Outliers? One of its themes is the problems of scaling trust networks

3:49 AM

FredR said...

Great, but please don't make us wait another 6 months for another post!

6:05 AM

Anonymous said...

"Quantum thought" is a poor name, imho. Too much pseudo-science and charlatanry being sold under the name "quantum". Besides, there's nothing even remotely resembling quantification in such thought ;-) "Scholastic thought" is also a poor name, imho, for too many scholars fail to think like that unfortunately. Why not "many-worlds thought"? It incorporates the quantum "superposition of thoughts", but since it avoids the over-used word "quantum", it will sound more serious and scholarly.

8:05 AM

nick said...

nazgulnarsil, that is essentially what my proposal is (albeit made well before Bitcoin ;-)

Anonymous (please choose a handle, thanks): no, thanks for the recommendation.

stochastix, the name "scholastic" is meant to refer to the methods medeival scholars, not modern ones. The medeival method in turn derived from the practive of legal debate. A better name would be "dialectic" except that Hegel and Marx ruined that perfectly good

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term. Tying it to a particular quantum interpretation would be false precision. :-) I'm simply using quantum mechanical superposition as a metaphor audiences with a modicum of modern physics knowledge audiences can understand, that's all. Alas the name does come with the unfortunate associations you mention. Perhaps "superpositional" will do.

8:44 AM

nick said...

FredR, I hope to be posting more often in the near future.

8:48 AM

Brian Dunbar said...

The issue of recording transfers of contractual rights is very interesting. I have a proposal for this, secure property titles.

We have a good enough system for this in place. Not a great system, but 'good enough'. How do we get from the way things are now to actually secure property titles?

I'm thinking aloud but .. wedding registry? In my state your wedding is not legal until it's registered at the county courthouse. Posit an easy-to use system where the happy couple can register online (actually secure) their marriage. Get folk used to the ease of this compared to going down to the courthouse.

Or not. But how _do_ we get over that hump?

6:43 PM

nick said...

Brian, keeping a ledger of who owns what financial instrument (e.g. a share of stock or a particular bond) is traditionally the job of an exchange or associated entity. It comes with quite a bit of bureaucracy for financial companies. So one near-term application for secure property titles is a quick, streamlined way to deploy a new financial instrument (e.g. some new kind of derivative or synthetic asset) without the traditional bureaucracy, yet with a great degree of security regarding transfers and proving ownership. Basically you implement secure titles for it (or for a synthetic asset, for its components), and then you can either let people transfer with the registry after they discover each other and negotiate out-of-band, or build an online exchange on top of this instrument registry, or both. I also have in mind tools to help design new kinds of synthetic assets.

Another relatively easy class of applications involve creating new, DNS-like public namespaces (i.e. ownership of names for particular purposes) to be used by some community. Also we might convince one or more DNS sub-domains to switch to this more secure and less politically controllable method.

Basically it's bringing the Bitcoin revolution to other kinds of digital property besides just money, and starting by making defining new kinds of digital property easy (since as you point out the old kinds already have established registries).

Since I'm working on some of this myself, anybody who wants to work on this feel free to e-mail me so we can coordinate or at least not overly duplicate efforts. My basic starting point is node.js, (including a node.js to act as a client that has different security assumptions than a browser, but can still take advantage of browsers for the UIs, all JavaScript in the same event oriented-style) but I'm open to new ideas or new implementations of a crypto plugin for node.js (which would presumably be in C or C++).

10:51 PM

nick said...

Incidentally, one of my starting points for defining online financial instrumnts and other smart contracts will be

https://github.com/nicksz/jTime

Feel free to pull it, add tests and try to break it , use it, modify it, etc.

11:08 PM

Tim said...

Nick, I agree with some commenters that "quantum thinking" is a bit misleading, especially with the hypish and newage [SIC} aspect of anything labeled "quantum thisorthat."

I prefer to think in terms of "possible worlds." Possible past worlds, which may be many. Possible future worlds, ditto. This is common in areas that make no use of quantum mechanics.

(Yeah, we can debate whether there are actual multiple pasts, actually, but de facto we use this model all of the time: "What might've caused this disease?" "What stopped the computer?" Diagnosis, forensics, even history, all about considering multiple possible paths to the One and True Present. I'm being facetious, as not even the One and True Present is this clearcut.)

Likewise, scenario planning in also about this consideration of multiple pasts, presents, and futures.

I've often thought that reading a lot of science fiction is useful in developing the habit of not using type-error constructs like "What will THE future bring?" To quote from "Terminator 2," "No future but what we make."

Interestingly perhaps for your readers, there's much on this stuff if one Googles these words: Saul Kripke, modal logic, Vladimir Voevodsky, topos theory, constructive logic, intuitionistic logic, the constructing observer.

(And, yes, the Many Worlds Interpretation of quantum mechanics impinges on this stuff in many ways. But, the possible worlds approach is a much broader superset of MWI, touching on linguistics, narratives, story understanding (a la AI), planning, forensics, and things that are true in various worlds (local set theories, or toposes.)

Really cool stuff. My major interest the past decade, as Nick knows.

--Tim May, Corralitos, CA

10:08 PM

nilux said...

Superpositional thinking isn't necessarily beneficial when debating with a mono-minded/subjectively thinking person, at least in my experience. The outcome tends to lean towards the more narrow-minded opinion. Actually when debating I think one should choose a position and defend it because collectively you are thinking "superpositionally".

Great thoughts, Nick!

12:53 AM

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